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Sacred Staging: Dramatic Magic in the Medieval Mass

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Abstract

This essay explores the dramatic elements of the medieval Mass, examining how this ritual functioned as a staged performance deliberately intended to provoke a response in its congregation, which, in dramatic terms, can be considered as its audience. An ongoing concern throughout the Middle Ages was the involvement of the (primarily English-speaking) congregation in the (Latin) prayers and action of the Mass, as well as how the congregation's response to the mass might be shaped. In this essay, I investigate how the actions of the priest performing the Mass might be seen to have clear parallels with the performance of an actor, just as the Mass itself parallels the Passion sequence of the York mystery plays. Moving on to church architecture, which functioned as a 'playing space' for the Mass, I then explore how their its deliberately exploited the use of space, light, and sound to capture and hold the attention of an audience. Finally, I consider the significance of the Lay Folks Mass Book, a text designed to help medieval audiences navigate the action of the Mass by following visual and aural cues from the priest. As a whole, the essay elucidates how the medieval Mass functioned as a staged performance deliberately intended to provoke a response in its audience, and how it sought to shape the nature of that response.

'The liturgy lay at the heart of medieval religion, and the Mass lay at the heart of the liturgy' (Duffy 91). This is the Irish historian Eamon Duffy's succinct summary of the Mass's significance to medieval religious life. In the Middle Ages, as it still is today, the Mass was the central ritual of Catholicism. Celebrated daily and believed to be the unbloody repetition of Christ's suffering and death on the cross, the Mass was the very essence of medieval faith; all other devotions were secondary and subordinate to it. The physical spaces in which the Mass was enacted—the chapels, churches, and cathedrals—were consciously designed as suitably dramatic places in which to perform this most sacred of rituals. Anthony Masinton's PhD thesis, 'Sacred Space: Priorities, Perception, and the Presence of God in Late Medieval

Yorkshire Parish Churches', explores how the interior church space was exploited to provide the most dramatic setting for the Mass, focusing on how space, light, and sound were used to direct the congregation's attention. This essay follows on from Masinton's work, but with a narrower temporal focus of between c.1400 and 1500 and extending into a consideration of the performative elements of the Mass itself. These elements can be seen as quasi-magical in that they were designed to help medieval congregations understand what they could not see—the mystery of transubstantiation, whereby at the words of consecration Christ's body and blood were believed to become actually present on the altar under the appearances of bread and wine. After a discussion of how the medieval Mass can be considered as drama,[1] the essay will turn to exploring church architecture and its scenographic elements—space and light—arguing that this was deliberately designed to help elevate the ritualistic elements of the Mass to true drama.

The Mass as Drama

The medieval Mass was a prayer, a catechism, an act of offering, thanksgiving, and adoration, but first and foremost it was understood to be a re-enacted sacrifice. Duffy explains how, from a medieval perspective,

> [i]n the Mass the redemption of the world, wrought on Good Friday once and for all, was renewed and made fruitful for all who believed. Christ himself, immolated on the altar of the cross, became present on the altar of the parish church, body, soul and divinity, and his blood flowed once again … As kneeling congregations raised their eyes to see the Host held high above the

1 Throughout this essay the word drama is used primarily in the sense of 'a series of actions or course of events having a unity like that of drama, and leading to a final catastrophe or consummation' (*OED Online*, 'Drama', n., 3) but also informed by its more usually recognised sense, '[a] composition in prose or verse, designed to be acted upon a stage, in which a story is related by means of dialogue and action, and is represented with accompanying gesture, costuming and scenery, as in real life; a play' (*OED Online*, 'Drama', n., 1.) In this it follows Clopper, who uses the term drama to mean 'an enacted script that contains … an entire narrative; that is, it is a text and a performance' (11).

> priest's head at the sacring, they were transported[2] to Calvary itself, and gathered not only into the passion and resurrection of Christ, but into the full sweep of salvation history as a whole (91).

Medieval Catholic doctrine stated that the rite was the actual renewal of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary—not merely a commemoration, remembrance, or re-enactment. The Mass looked back to the ancient Calvary, yes, but the sacrifice of Calvary also re-occurred in present time as the priest, standing in the place of Christ (*in persona Christi*), said the words of consecration. But though the priest conducted the Mass, its active power—the renewal of Calvary—came from Christ alone, not from any virtue or action on the part of the priest, who was merely 'the instrument through which Christ acts' (Young 85). This concept of the priest standing in for Christ has led, naturally enough, to suggestions that the action of the Mass is a drama in which the priest is the chief actor. This proposition was offered as early as 1100 by Honorius of Autun:

> It is known that those who recited tragedies in theaters represented the actions of opponents by gestures before the people. In the same way our tragic author [sic; i.e., the celebrant] represents by his gestures in the theater of the Church before the Christian people the struggle of Christ. (qtd. in Latin in Young 83; trans. Clopper 51)

Here, Karl Young comments: '[t]he opening sentences of this passage clearly proclaim that in the Mass the celebrant genuinely impersonates Christ as the tragic actor does the persons represented in the profane theatre' (83). However, for Young, the parallels between the church and the theatre hold only on a very broad level. He is right to say that the Mass is not a drama in the sense of a stage play; the medieval

2 Duffy's word choice here is slightly problematic as medieval congregations were not, of course, physically 'transported' in time and place, although they were supposed to align themselves spiritually with the events of the original Calvary. Although Duffy does not pursue the matter, this invites an investigation of the dichotomy between literal and figurative medieval religious experience.

priest was not an actor; he did not assume to be, or to take on the role of, God. But the distinction between drama and the dramatic element (i.e., Young's assertion that the Mass is not a drama, a stage play, with the priest an actor following a stage script; but it *can* be considered dramatic, to have elements of drama) is too sharp. This is especially so given that the word drama was unknown in the English lexicon until the sixteenth century;[3] the differentiation is therefore one that would never have occurred to the fifteenth-century citizen. Middle English had several words covering various activities with a theatrical, dramatic, or performative element, including spectacle, jape, ludus, and its literal translations, play or game.[4] Of these, 'play' is probably closest in meaning to the modern sense of drama (although it is not an exact synonym). It was also used as a verb. The OED Online gives one usage of the verb 'play' as '[t]o carry out or practise (an action); to perform or execute (a movement)' ('play, v.'). Theoretically, then, this sense of the word could be legitimately applied to the saying of the Mass. Because 'play' was also the word used for the performance of secular drama, it invites further questions about the relationship of the Mass to performance. Unfortunately, this interesting line of thought is stymied by a frustrating lack of evidence that the word was ever used in this way in direct reference to the Mass. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind. Drama and the dramatic in the Middle Ages were not necessarily as distinct as Young suggests.

The form, structure and intention of the Mass may not be a drama in the modern recognised sense of a theatrical performance, but the rite certainly incorporates many deliberately dramatic elements. This has been widely recognised by scholars. Most influentially, O. B. Hardison and R.N. Swanson were among the first to suggest this. Worship was always the essential and primary purpose of the Mass, but as the rite developed over time it incorporated many instances of

3 See Clopper 3-19. The *OED Online* gives ?1521 as the first recorded use of *drama*, in Alexander Barclay's *The Boke of Codrus and Mynalcas*. ('Drama, n.')

4 For a detailed discussion of these terms and their differing connotations and implications, see Clopper 3-19.

dramatic symbolism. By the late Middle Ages the actions of those at the altar (primarily the priest, but also any ministers assisting him) were deliberately intended to provoke a response in the congregation, just as contemporary drama intended to spark a reaction in its audience. In many respects the medieval Mass and medieval Passion drama, particularly the Passion sequence from York mystery play cycle,[5] were the dialectical antithesis of each other. Substantially the same as the sacrifice on Calvary, the Mass is accidentally different; the Passion plays are the reverse, imitating the accidents (suffering and death) of the original Calvary but in substance merely figurative. In other words, medieval Passion drama *appeared* to be the actual re-enactment of the original sacrifice on Calvary, but only the Mass actually *was*. Turning about the common lynchpin of faith, Mass and plays negotiated an irreconcilable paradox, forever opposite sides of the coin of medieval faith: the Mass was believed to be Calvary renewed, while the plays could only ever be Calvary remembered. Yet they were bound together by a complex, rich, and detailed network of cross-references. Both Mass and Passion plays display a pervasive concern with engaging an audience and directing their attention towards the suffering body of Christ. Thus, at the climax of the Mass—the Elevation of the Host—the congregation was expected to reflect, with the correct degree of awe, wonder and humility, on the suffering Christ:

> for þat is he that iudas salde,
> and sithen was scourged & don on rode,
> and for mankynd there shad his blood
>
> [for this is he that was sold by Judas,
> and then was scourged and placed on the cross,
> and for mankind there shed his blood.]
> (*Lay Folks Mass Book* B l.407-9)

5 The York mystery play cycle is a collection of forty-seven short interconnected plays, or pageants, which together tell the story of Biblical salvation history from the Fall of the Angels to the Last Judgement, with the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ forming the natural climax of the cycle.

This is recalled and echoed in the Crucifixion play of the York cycle by Christ's speech from the cross addressing 'Al men þat walkis by waye or strete' and urging them to 'Byholdes myn heede, myn handis, and my feete' (*Crucifixio Christi* l.254-5).

The Playing Spaces of the Mass: Church Architecture

Late medieval English parish churches varied widely in size and splendour according to the wealth of their parishioners and benefactors, but all adhered to the same basic plan. They were built with the high altar facing east, towards Jerusalem. The main door, at the west end, opened into the nave, which held the congregation. The altar was housed in the chancel, at the top of a set of broad steps, usually separated from the nave by the rood screen. Behind the altar was a large window, its stained glass forming a backdrop for the altar and the action that took place there. The main focal point of any church was the high altar, around which the action of the Mass centered. Visually and physically, this was separated from the rest of the church by the rood screen, through which the ordinary faithful were not permitted to pass. This immediately set the altar apart, marking as noteworthy both the people who were permitted to enter it (the priest and his acolytes) and the action that took place there. This division opens up the potential for the high altar to function in the manner of a playing space, setting up the dynamics of a player/spectator relationship between the priest and his congregation. The ordinary form of the Mass today has lost this dynamic, with the priest facing the congregation so that both are equal participants in the rite. But it is still visible today (see Figure 1) in Masses celebrated according to the Tridentine rite, which remains almost exactly the form of the Mass celebrated during the Middle Ages.



Fig. 1: The player/spectator relationship in the Tridentine Mass: the congregation observing the acts of the priest and his server. Photograph by David van Kroonenburg. Used with permission.

Electric lighting being unknown, medieval churches relied mainly on natural light for illumination. Candles were of course used as well but it would have taken a great many to light the shadowy interior of even a medium-sized parish church. They were used primarily on or near the altar for ritual purposes (as with the sanctuary lamp, for example, which was kept burning near the tabernacle to indicate Christ's presence), rather than illumination. Using the parish church of St Giles as a case study, Masinton shows that the altar was placed so as to receive the maximum possible amount of natural light through the east and west windows. The altar is most brightly lit during morning hours, which was when the majority of liturgical services, including the Mass, took place. The combined placing of windows and altar ensures that the nave was 'normally in darkness during the most important service times', therefore ensuring that 'the focus for attention … [was]

on the high altar where the priest instituted the (usually morning) miracle of the Eucharist' (Masinton 30).

Figure 2 shows the arrangement of altar, east window, rood screen and rood loft in a typical medieval parish church (Saint Michael and All Angels, Hubberholme, Yorkshire). A High Mass is the complete ceremonial form, requiring a deacon and subdeacon in addition to the priest, the use of incense, and parts of the Mass to be chanted or sung. A Low Mass is celebrated by a priest only, does not use incense, and is not sung. During a High Mass the altar was a major auditory focal point as well as a visual one, as it was from here that the priest and deacons sang or chanted the liturgy. In churches large enough to have a rood loft, this provided a secondary focal point, one that was both auditory and visual. The loft housed the choir and sometimes an organ as well; its elevated position ensured that the sound was distributed throughout the whole church as well as allowing the choir to 'observe the priest's ritual actions in the chancel [this was necessary, as the priest's actions provided the cues for the choir], and simultaneously be seen and heard by the parishioners in the nave' (Whiting 199). The loft was sometimes used by the priest for reading the Gospel (Durand, *Rationale Divinorum Officium I*, 167) and for singing the Passion on Good Friday (Whiting 200), presumably because this position, rather than the altar, provided both better visibility and audibility for the congregation in the nave below.

The predominant and most evocative sound of a church, however, was its bells. These were in constant daily use, their main function being

> to summon the parish to its communal worship. For this purpose they were rung—particularly at the canonical hours of prime, tierce, sext, nones, vespers and mattins [sic][6] —on Sundays, week days, saints' days and the

6 William Durand, writing in the thirteenth century, says they were rung twelve times a day, marking each hour of the Divine Office (*Rationale Divinorum Officium I* 71). See Chapter IV of *Rationale Divinorum Officium I: The Symbolism of Churches* for Durand's explanation of the bells' symbolism, and the difference between ringing, chiming, pealing, and tolling.

> major festivals: Easter …, Corpus Christi day, All Souls Day and All Hallow eve (Whiting 171).



Fig. 2: St. Michael and All Angels Parish Church (twelfth century), Hubberholme, England. East window, altar, rood screen and choir loft. Photograph by Sebastian Bloomfield. Used with permission.

During the Mass the church bell rang at the Sanctus, 'call[ing] men and women outside the church to bow' (Whiting 171); on the altar the small sacring bell was rung at the Consecration, reminding the congregation to look up and behold the Host. The bells were silent only once a year, for the three days before Easter, marking Christ's betrayal and Passion (Durand, *Rationale Divinorum Officium I* 182). Thus, at the very moment the Crucifixion was liturgically recalled, the necessity for it—man's alienation from God—was also being evoked or re-enacted.

It has been suggested that the religious functions of churches sometimes overlapped with secular pastimes, and that church property was not always used solely for worship:

> Not only did the medieval parish churches serve their communities through services and prayers; they were also the centres of community life. Barochial

> [sic: Parochial?] festivities were held regularly during the summer, especially at Whitsun, Midsummer, Michaelmas or the patronal feast of the church; ale and food were sold and entertainment was provided … Such activities may originally have been held in the naves of the churches, uncluttered as these were by pews (Bettey 62).

Some parishes, especially in the south-east of England (specifically Kent: records survive from Rye, Romney, Lydd, and Winklesea[7]) even used the churches as playing spaces for secular drama. Even where this was not the custom—there is no evidence for it at York—the interiors of medieval churches were very much performance spaces, in a religious sense if not in a secular one. They were playing spaces for the religious activities that took place inside, primarily the Mass, but also processions and other liturgical events. Masinton has proved how carefully the churches were constructed, and how the architects deliberately brought together the use of light, sound, and space in order to maximise the impact of the Mass as a visual and aural event. This can be seen in Figure 3, showing the chancel and high altar of All Saints North Street in York. The East Window, rood screen and altar steps all align; this draws the focus to the high altar in the centre of the rood screen, beneath the crucifix—a visual representation of the bloody sacrifice on Calvary, which was mirrored each day on the altar in unbloody form.

Treatises as Guides to Mass-Drama

Throughout the Middle Ages several treatises on the Mass were produced in order to help the lay congregation identify its 'dramatic' moments and thereby follow the progression of the Mass. The most well-known of these is probably the Lay Folks Mass Book (hereafter abbreviated to *LFMB*).[8] Much of the book is taken up with

7 See Gibson, J.M., ed. *Kent: Diocese of Canterbury. The Records of Early English Drama 16*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.

8 Most likely translated into English from French in the latter half of the twelfth century, there are four largely similar but subtly different texts of the *LFMB*, based on

identifying the priest's actions, which function as cues either for private meditation (usually on the Crucifixion) or for the saying of private prayers, which are conveniently provided.[9] Apart from the Elevation of the Host, numerous other occasions are identified where the action of the priest serves to guide the response of the congregation. The movement of the priest or deacon to the left-hand side of the altar for the reading of the Gospel was a signal for the congregation to 'speke … noght/bot thenk on him that dere the boght' [speak not, but think of him that dearly bought you] (B l.183-4); the priest's 'spred[ing] of his arms on-brade [in a cross]' (C l.242) recalled not only the Crucifixion but also signified the 'tyme to praye for the dede [dead]' (C l.244); the priest's *Pater Noster* indicated that the Kiss of Peace was approaching, when the congregation kissed the pax[10] handed round to them. Occasionally the reader is instructed to follow the prayers of the priest—at the Confiteor, Apostles' Creed and Pater Noster (the latter 'first in laten,/ and sithen [then] in englishe' [B l.494-5])—but never aloud, rather 'priuely' [privately] (C l.492). The only time the reader has the chance

four separate surviving manuscripts, labelled B, C, E and F. The Early English Text Society edition presents all four concurrently. Quotations from the *LFMB* are from the EETS edition, cited with the text label followed by line number.

9 The text also frequently directs the reader to say the Pater Noster (Lord's Prayer) and Ave [Maria] (Hail Mary). These are not always included in full, presumably because everyone was expected to know them by heart. Prayers are provided to ask that the offering of the Mass may be pleasing to God and to ask for His grace, for the Church Militant, the living (including 'Frendes, tenauntes, and vs seruynge,/Olde men, children, and wymmen,/Marchaunte, men of crafte, and tilmen./Riche men, poure, and smale' (F l.166-9), the dead, and for the priest.

10 This was 'a little plaque of metal, ivory, or wood, generally decorated with some pious carving and provided with a handle, which was first brought to the altar for the celebrant to kiss at the proper place in the Mass and then brought to each of the congregation in turn at the altar rails' ('Kiss'). Originally the Kiss of Peace was given literally among the members of the congregation, but, though church officials tried to guard against 'the abuses to which this form of salutation might lead' (ibid) by separating the congregation into men and women and stipulating that only members of the same sex could kiss, they were soon worried about a lack of decorum. Their solution to this was to introduce the pax instead, first mentioned in the 1248 statutes of the Archbishop of York. It is also clearly identified in the *LFMB*: 'Therefore þe prest whanne þe pax schal kysse' (F l.261).

to pray aloud, thereby becoming directly involved with the action of the Mass, is at the conclusion of the priest's Pater Noster: 'bot answere at temptacionem/set [sic] libera nos a malo, amen' [after the priest says *in tentationen*, answer *sed libera nos a malo, amen*] (C l.489). Even this was not necessarily always said aloud—the B and E texts are not specific, but the C and F texts both say 'answere hym, lowde [loudly] *or* stille [quietly]' (C l.274; F l.250, my emphasis).



Fig. 3: Chancel of All Saints North Street (fourteenth century), York, England. Stained glass east window; high altar and steps; rood screen (nineteenth-century replica). Photograph by Eleanor Bloomfield.

The *LFMB* is apt to become rather repetitive, as it reduces the continuous action of the Mass to specific, easily identifiable points

in the liturgy. These serve as triggers for recalling the congregation to contemplation of Christ's Passion and its bloody sufferings, and as reminders for the people to say the appropriate prayer—nothing more. It does not encourage the people to progress beyond this basic level of response to the liturgy. More scholarly treatises on the Mass show a far greater awareness and understanding of the liturgy's dramatic symbolism; Durand's thirteenth-century *Rationale Divinorum Officium IV: On the Mass and Each Action Pertaining to It*, for example, is an incredibly and minutely detailed Latin text which does quite literally fulfil its title's promise of commenting on every single action throughout the Mass, revealing a much richer, denser, and more visually impressive ritual than that glimpsed through the *LFMB*. However, that the latter text exists at all, and in the vernacular English, does suggest that there was some expectation to involve the congregation with the Mass—to give them a role, albeit a private one, or, at the very least, a set of cues through which they could follow what was going on at the altar. The *LFMB*, and the fuss over the pax, prove that throughout the Middle Ages there was an ongoing concern over how to include the congregation—or audience—and how to shape their experience. These, of course, are issues of performance that also concern a playwright. The anonymous author of the *LFMB* thus arguably takes on this role, his intention being to shape and present the Mass as a recognisably dramatic event.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, the dramatic elements of the late medieval Mass were an integral part of the ritual, inseparable from the renewal of sacrifice. Moreover, they were deliberately intended to work on and with their audiences, just as a modern-day stage play does. Though the drama of the liturgy was less obvious, more subtle, more 'magical,' than the secular drama of the mystery plays, it was equally deliberate. As this essay has shown, the hallmarks of dramatic performance are evident in the actions of the Mass-drama itself, the care taken to arrange the architectural playing space of the churches, and the evident concern

over audience involvement, engagement, and response expressed through the *LFMB* and other similar treatises. The late medieval Mass was sacred; but it was also staged, the magic of faith and the magic of theatrical performance combining to direct and shape the audience's experience.

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